

Margaret Reardon née Chapman

Trowbridge and Douglas. ATS instructor on Special Operators Training Battalion. Interviewed March 2014.

Life before the ATS

Before joining the ATS, I had worked in the accounts department of the Cement Marketing Board in Cambridge. I also volunteered for Air Raid Precaution duties in Cambridge, manning the telephone. This involved receiving information from the Observer Corps and relaying it to officials such as doctors and hospitals.

In 1941, aged 21, I had to take on work of national importance, as did everyone and so I went to the Labour Exchange. By now I was working in an upmarket ladies' fashion shop in Cambridge. At the Labour Exchange I was given the option of signing up for work in one of the Forces, the Land Army or going into the factories. I chose the ATS because I came from a military family; my father served in the Grenadier Guards during World War 1 and my grandfather had also served in the army.

The Selection process

My initial military training was at Glen Parva barracks, Leicestershire, which included marching, discipline and lots of medical and fitness tests. I was selected at Glen Parva to join the Royal Signals ATS service at Trowbridge, Wiltshire.

At the training camp in Trowbridge, we had to complete various intelligence and aptitude tests and were assigned to various specialities. I was given lots of tests to do with listening, hearing and distinguishing between sounds. There were also lots of interviews and although I had book-keeping skills, they didn't seem to be taken into consideration.

Initial training

Those of us that passed this selection process were assigned to the Y Service. I was attached to the signal training outfit at Trowbridge, where we continued our military training but also started to learn Morse code, how to operate equipment and the method of noting codes. We were trained in electricity and magnetism so that we could repair our wireless sets on operations. I was only at Trowbridge for a few weeks as the Wiltshire regiment was returning to those barracks.

I remained a Private for most of my career; I was promoted to unpaid Lance Corporal at one stage but did not have any ambitions to become an officer.

Off to Palace Camp, Isle of Man

I remember the whole of the ATS Trowbridge regiment being sent to the Isle of Man on a dedicated train. We were told not to tell anybody about our transfer because it was secret and in the early hours of the morning at least 500 of us were marched through the centre of Trowbridge to the train station in our plimsolls, to keep the noise down. Despite the secrecy, somehow word got out to the local residents and they lined the streets to say goodbye! We boarded the train to Crewe and when we arrived, were taken somewhere for breakfast. We then travelled on to Fleetwood, marched to the docks and caught the ferry to the Isle of Man. The ferry was the famous Lady of Mann, used in the D Day landings.

On arrival in Douglas we marched to the Palace Camp and were assigned our quarters, which were in boarding houses, in an area, approximately 100 yards long, that had been fenced in and had previously been used for foreign internees. My unit was called the Special Operators Training Battalion (SOTB), comprising 500 girls and 500 men and we were all crammed into those boarding houses. We were a huge outfit – when we went on a route march around the island, the line literally stretched from one end of the island to the other, it certainly brought all the people out to watch! I think the local people in the Isle of Man were quite fond of us, I don't recall anyone doing anything bad. The foreign internees had all gone by the time we arrived. The camp was very dirty when we arrived and working parties had to give the place a good scrub up. We lived very comfortably though, once settled in.

Several girls shared a room and other girls were billeted in the same house with bathrooms on every floor. We had very cold showers and little hot water. It was also difficult as we all had to share the same bathroom down the corridor. A group of us got to know the people who owned the pub behind us and were allowed to use their bathroom for nice hot baths. There three girls I remembered from my time in the Isle of Man: Paddy Broadbent, from Liverpool, who was of Irish descent; Margaret Adderley, she and I became close friends; and Doreen, who was a corporal. We were all close friends at the time but lost contact after the war as I went overseas.

People were very kind to us. I got to know some people called Quirk, the local baker and a well-known family, who were very kind to Margaret, Paddy and me. They used to take us home after church on Sunday, give us afternoon tea and we'd have a bath there. I kept in touch with them for

many years but we couldn't find them when we went back. We had a reasonable social life; NAAFI dances and the local Palais de dance, where I met my husband.

I shared my room with a girl from Barbados, Joanna Kish. There were several girls who had come over from the colonies to help with the war effort, including two from Barbados, whom I got friendly with. They found the weather very cold and quite hard. They used to receive parcels from home, which consisted of things you couldn't get in England, such as sweets and tins of rum – something most of us hadn't drunk before! We used to sit up in bed, drinking that rum!

These friends from the Caribbean all went to work in the Y Service, as far as I know, although I've no idea of which stations they went to. I think we were all careful not to share too much information. Some went overseas afterwards, but we never heard from them. I didn't keep in touch with any of the men in the Battalion but I did keep in touch with a couple of the band leaders, including Kenny Skingle, one of Acker Bilk's band, who was on a course with me.

Routine and work at Palace Camp

We used to march through the parade ground to work and do long route marches around the island, which were very interesting, and all over 10 miles. We did PT on the promenade in full public view, in our official khaki bloomers, because we didn't have any proper PT kit. It was alright if you were slim, but the bigger girls were really embarrassed! I think there were complaints from various places and eventually we were provided with some PT kit. We had 500 men in the camp and I remember them being glued to the windows as we went by – they used to say it was the most wonderful sight of their day, seeing these ATS girls going past in their khaki bloomers! Someone in the camp also gave ballet lessons, as she had been a ballet dancer. We played darts, danced, went to the NAAFI and went ballroom dancing. I started rock climbing, which was rather dangerous without instructions!

The food was basic and quite heavy, better suited to men. We had an awful lot of cheddar cheese served as Welsh rarebit, which I didn't like much then, nor to this day. Manx kippers were gratefully received however. We had a small NAAFI at the camp and the Derby Castle Ballroom, which belonged to the Manx government, was taken over as our gym. We had our own dance band, mostly made up of musicians from famous London bands at the time.

Days were spent on eight hour shifts down at the wireless station, learning our trade. Men and women trained and worked separately and the men knew that at some point they could be posted overseas. About 10-12 of us would be sat in front of the radio set wearing earphones and told which net to tune into. This wasn't classroom training material, we listening to actual operators, live transmissions. We would wait until we heard the operator and didn't know where they were based; they could have been in Germany or France. The equipment was easy to use but the earphones were heavy and pinched the ears after a while! Some people found the work stressful and had to be taken off the training. I believe the work gave me tinnitus.

We also had various lectures on electricity and magnetism. I recall a big classroom, with little sets, and that the magnetism lessons passed over my head! We were supposed to be able to mend our sets if we were in the field, but I can't put two wires together even today!

I don't recall the Isle of Man being bombed whilst I was there.

Recording the signals

We would take down the Morse signal onto pads with grids, five letters at a time. We used running hand and must have written in English as I didn't speak another language at that time well enough. We didn't understand what we were taking down and when I finished a task it made no more sense than at the beginning! These Morse signals could come from anywhere in the world and we had to learn the operator's handwriting from the signal as we needed to be sure that we were taking down code from the same person. The key was that everyone tapping in Morse code has a different way of doing it, a different handwriting style, and so you could always tell if it were the same operator. We were specifically trained to spot and report if the operator or the transmission frequency changed, which meant their location may have altered. This was important information. Where this happened, we would put up our hand and say 'there's been a change here, somebody's moved.' We knew we were intercepting enemy broadcasts but we were not aware of any other kind of transmissions. Actually, we weren't given any background information, simply instructions on what to do. It was our group that reported a battleship trying to escape the French coast. One of our team of operators on night shift picked up that the ship had moved, because they could tell the operator's position was slightly different to previously.

I don't remember much Morse code nowadays. Funnily enough for a recent birthday, I was sent a card in Morse, from someone downstairs who was also in the Signals. It took me a long time to read it!

The bigger Bletchley Park 'picture'

Whilst this was our training period, the work was for real and we were told that all the information we produced went 'somewhere', although I never knew exactly where. So even at this stage we were contributing to the work at Bletchley Park. We were told it was war work, but didn't know it was intelligence - but of course all war effort work was treated as secret. I hadn't heard of Bletchley Park at this point and I didn't meet any of the famous people associated with it.

Indeed, when the secrets came out about Bletchley Park in 1974, it still didn't mean anything to me. I'd only heard something in passing about the place and didn't know it had anything to do with our work. My sister Alice had worked at Bletchley but only talked about it long after that. However even after 1974 I didn't feel comfortable talking about my work because of the Official Secrets Act, which we'd all signed. And of course there are some that still don't talk about what they did, although nothing I'm telling you is secret information any more.

Pay and Leave

We weren't paid very much, about 7 bob per week and no deductions were made from it, as far as I know. We spent most on food, extra meals of fish and chips, that sort of thing. My parents used to send me money as well. The cement marketing board had kept my pension stamps going during the war and also sent me comfort parcels of chocolate and cigarettes – I was a heavy smoker at the time!

We had 2 weeks leave every 6 months, which was paid for by the army. I went to visit my parents when on leave. All I told people was that I was doing a clerical job, as I was bound by the Official Secrets Act. Indeed I have never spoken to anyone about my work until now. I hadn't told my parents what I was doing; it was drilled into us not to talk about our work. I recall clearly the 'walls have ears' advert.

Move to Permanent Staff

The tinnitus I developed in the Isle of Man, which was exacerbated by the constant noise of the work, meant that I was taken off the course. I was placed on permanent staff and worked in the Chief Instructor's office, undertaking clerical work. I wasn't sent abroad because I had food allergies, which were considered to be a problem for overseas postings. My paybook says 'fit for overseas, non-tropical' – which seems rather funny as I got married and went overseas to live in the heat for 26 years!

In 1945, after the war ended, I married my husband, Major Patrick William Reardon, of the Essex Regiment. He had also been based on the on the Isle of Man, doing OCTU training and we met at a dance. He'd also been through the D Day landings.

After the war ended, I remained on the Isle of Man in the Chief Instructor's Office and my husband was posted overseas to the Middle East, involved in the military occupation of the former Italian colony of Eritrea. As a member of training staff, I undertook classified clerical work, as by now I had security clearance. I think there was a lot of security vetting of people like myself. I don't know how they did this, though, other than I do remember having to declare on a form what my parents did. I was with 2 Jewish German girls and I don't recall any particular sensitivity about their background – I don't think any of us girls were considered a bad risk.

I had been sent down to London while the bombing raids were still on, on a clerical course. I stayed in the YMCA in Sloane Square. The raids were dreadful.

Towards the end of the war I was sent to Shrewsbury to do secret clerical work. During that time I did some work at St Dunstan's home for the blind and we girls were asked if we could take blinded soldiers out to the pub or cinema and make sure they got home safely. For a girl who was a non-drinker, taking a drunk soldier home was quite an experience; I'd had a sheltered life up until then!

Post-war life

I was able to join my husband in Eritrea in 1946. Because I was not yet demobbed, and therefore still officially in the ATS, I was asked to work in the military administration offices, doing work of a sensitive nature. I did all the typing and clerical work for the proclamations, which the Italians were not allowed to do. I had four Italians working under me.

I was officially demobbed in 1952 and I still had my uniform with me, in case I needed it. By then I had given birth to my first child, Timothy, in a military hospital. I recall having to stand to attention by our beds when the military commander came round, despite having given birth earlier that morning! My husband was employed officially as Officer in Charge of Prisons and was also involved in the four power commission, which was visiting the territory to decide on the future.

I helped with some of the interpreting and secretarial support, as by then I was bilingual in Italian and English. So I never stopped working! My husband

went in the Colonial Service as a district administrator and I supported him in this work, helping in clinics, working in local schools and on safari work and in his role as a magistrate. I raised my family and supported my husband with his work in some difficult areas of Africa, in Tanzania and Botswana for 26 years. After the independence of these countries, my husband was transferred to the Western Pacific and the Caribbean. Very sadly he died in 1981 aged 57 years. I returned to the UK at this point.

My medal collection, which I still wear on Armistice Day, is pretty basic I think: a 1939-1945 medal; a France and Germany medal; a Victory medal; and a Defence Medal. I believe everyone received these. And of course now I can wear my Bletchley Park badge too! I've put my citation next to the door, for everyone to see, I'm very proud of it!

My daughter took me back to the Isle of Man about 18 years ago and we returned to the house where we lived. They had one or two photographs of us girls and so I think people had been back and donated photographs to them. I wasn't aware of any formal museum or memorial set up in Douglas at that time, although perhaps they have now, like they have at Beaumanor Hall, Leicester.

Other wartime memories

Cambridge was bombed during the war, one of the first places to be bombed. But we also had a Lancaster Bomber come down in Histon Road, just opposite the cemetery. It had lost its way coming back from a bombing raid and I remember the day it happened, slicing 3 cottages in half and killing all the inhabitants. I also remember the planes going over during the 1000 bomber raids and the incredible noise they made. My father knew when the raids were due, as he was in the Observer Corps. He would be on duty, standing in the wet field. Although we didn't know anyone directly involved, my mother used to count the planes out and in, worried like mad, thinking of all the other mothers.